

Lateral

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Review of *Skin Theory: Visual Culture and the Postwar Prison Laboratory* by Cristina Visperas (New York University Press)

by Patrick Michael Teed | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT In *Skin Theory*, Cristina Visperas identifies how the captive body in the postwar era is positioned as the ideal test subject. She does so through a thorough interrogation of Albert Kligman's primarily dermatological human experiments at Holmesburg Prison to argue that racial capture enables the research enterprise. Suturing conversations in Black studies, science and technology studies, and carceral studies, each chapter reads objects in relation to these experiments to argue that grounding its brutal procedures was a visual culture enabled by the figurative uses of the skin.

KEYWORDS anti-Blackness, carcerality, prison, race, technoscience, visual culture

Skin Theory: Visual Culture and the Postwar Prison Laboratory. By Cristina Mejia Visperas. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2022. 243 pp. (paperback). ISBN: 9781479810789. US List: \$30.00

In *Skin Theory: Visual Culture and the Postwar Prison Laboratory*, Cristina Visperas interrogates how the post-war test subject found its "ideal figuration in the captive body" (2). Through a rigorous examination of the medical science program at Holmesburg Prison, pioneered by the venerated dermatologist and University of Pennsylvania professor Albert Kligman, she argues that Kligman's experimental procedure discloses the quotidian racial violence rendering scientific

method possible. In her consummately interdisciplinary study, she elaborates “a common optical rationality” (2) across both medical science and capture, a scopic regime fixated on the symbolic and material uses of the skin. While *Skin Theory* analyzes a variety of different sources related to Kligman’s experiments, Visperas retains a clear vision of how the skin, and its multiple figurative and material iterations, grounds the carceral visibility she critiques.

Early in the text, Visperas provocatively states that “entanglements between science and captivity were neither accidental nor contingent but *paradigmatic*” (10), and so her text is “less interested in charting a visual narrative of scientific racism than in studying science as a fundamentally racial optic” (11). In so doing, she theorizes the imaging of the scientific structure of racism as the cause and organizing force of the scientific gaze, demonstrating how the “perfect control conditions” (12) of the laboratory mirror those of the prison.

Across all six sections of the text (an introduction, four chapters, and a coda), Visperas reads the skin as a primary organizing mechanism for the racial structure of laboratory science. In the introduction, she adumbrates the theoretical contours of her argument, positing that central to the scopic underpinnings of scientific research is an epistemological investment in racial capture. She concludes with a novel reading of Fanon’s deployment of the language of microscopy to argue that, for Fanon, “[B]lackness is *pre-visual*” (21), even as it is over-determined by the look. In so doing, she identifies anti-Blackness as “something that remains stuck in method, in perpetual preparation and anticipation of its final product, the image” (21). Thus, while raciality is located within the skin, it requires a method to stage its appearance (hence its *pre-visibility*). Refusing to identify the skin with some transcendental power to signify difference, Visperas instead explains how, despite being a category of phenotypic differentiation, epidermal racialization requires ongoing work.

Building on this theoretical framework, Visperas introduces the reader to some of the specifics of Kligman's dermatological experiments in her first chapter, provocatively arguing that Black skin operates as a screen to both visualize and vitalize whiteness. This chapter performs the difficult but impressive theoretical work of contending with the racializing processes operative within an experimental procedure disproportionately targeting Black skin, but for the express goal of improving white dermatological outcomes. That is, she confronts the aporia central to Kligman's experimental process: the use of Black skin as a means to generate dermatological interventions that benefit a white audience both predicated on and necessarily disavowing a racial-essentialist logic of epidermal difference. Through close readings of research photographs, particularly those focusing on Kligman's tretinoin experiments, she argues that Black skin forms the canvas or screen for the articulation of white patients. Tracing the symbolic deconstruction and reconstruction of racial epidermalization, its (pre-)visual locatedness within the skin, Visperas demonstrates how race constitutes a mode (not an object) of seeing in the photographs.

In the second chapter, Visperas grapples with Kligman's brutal research on allergenicity and irritancy. Illuminating the mechanics by which Black pain is rendered imperceptible, Visperas demonstrates how this imperceptibility served to install a "captive agency" (78) in the test subjects, further authorizing the intensification of Kligman's violent experimental methods.

In the third chapter, she shifts registers to emphasize the architectonic structure of the prison itself, engaging ruin photography and paranormal television. She provides readings of how these different artistic sites memorialize Holmesburg and the violent experiments it once housed—even when, in the case of the television show *Ghost Stalkers*, its history is disavowed. In so doing, she engages a much broader problematic concerning how the skin operates as a spatial organizing tool within architecture, and further theorizes the abrasions of ruin and

its capture in relation to the dermal damage the prison enforced. However, it is her conclusion to this chapter that is most compelling (although somewhat disengaged from the prior argument).

In her conclusion to chapter three, she posits that the body that prison architecture refers to is perhaps not the external skin of the epidermis but the internal structure of digestion. In so doing, she draws Holmesburg toward Saidiya Hartman's work on anti-Blackness as the belly of the world, torquing Hartman's usage of the gestational and re-insisting on the importation of the digestional for theorizing captive violence.¹

In her fourth chapter, Visperas offers close readings of the standards for testing on humans emergent at the time, arguing that the carceral conditions at Holmesburg occasioned the rise of bioethics and its contemporary standards of analysis. Thus, she traces how the emerging field of bioethics distorts the coercive conditions of prison research, adjusting the prisoner through the frame of a vulnerable population rather than a captive one and performing what she provocatively calls "ethical research practice through prison reform" (146). In her analysis, she approaches discourse as a skin that occludes the quotidian structure of terror and violence undergirding the prison system as a whole and prison experimentation particularly. In so doing, she reads how the "hieroglyphic" of captivity (132) is situated within a broader discursive field predicated on the ongoing and methodological work necessary to stage race pre-visually.

Finally, in the coda she compellingly argues that Black revolutionaries like Assata Shakur and George Jackson provide "an insurgent form of bioethics" (172) that challenges the state as the primary antagonist to Black life. Visperas suggests that their insistence on violence as a modality for redress—particularly revolutionary violence against the state—offers a different diagnostic for assessing the biomedical disparities endemic to states of enforced breach. In line with this, she contends that scholars working within the field of bioethics (and

perhaps the politics of science more broadly) must seriously contend with violence as a necessary and legitimate counterresponse to the state form.

Throughout *Skin Theory*, Visperas refuses to romanticize the possibility of an outside to the racial violence she diagnoses, continuously examining how forms of carceral “freedom” are yoked to submission and underpinned by domination. The reader is left with an unflinching critique of the scopic regime inaugurated by the postwar prison laboratory, and an understanding of the scale at which this regime has infiltrated our social world. However, Visperas’s analysis of the paradigmatic structure of capture seems, at times, to be at odds with her investment in the particularity of the prison. She qualifies the prison laboratory as distinct from the clinical trial, which she claims is subtended by the doctor-patient dyad and its attendant model of care.

While *Skin Theory* is focused on the prison as a field of capture, the violent uses of the skin to which Visperas draws our attention are symptomatic not of a carceral architectonics, but of epidermalization under conditions of anti-Blackness, heightening the urgency with which we must all read and take seriously her claims. As we collectively negotiate the relationship between knowledge and liberation, Visperas’s challenging and rewarding work demands we consider how the constitution of the former might radically foreclose the availability of the terms of the latter.

Notes

1. To think anti-Blackness as “the belly of the world” is to begin from the assumptive logic that the “*slave ship is a womb/abyss*,” and to thus theorize racial slavery and its afterlives in relation to the belly as a material and theoretical site of dispossession. See Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166. See also Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007). 
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